DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 280 EC 309 206

AUTHOR	Massanari, Carol B.
TITLE	Connecting the IEP to the General Curriculum: A Talking Paper.
INSTITUTION	Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, Des Moines, IA.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.; Utah State Univ., Logan.
PUB DATE	2002-06-10
NOTE	15p.
CONTRACT	H326R98000
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Accommodations (Disabilities); Access to Education; *Curriculum; Curriculum Design; *Disabilities; *Educational Assessment; Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Legislation; Inclusive Schools; *Individualized Education Programs; Needs Assessment; Program Development; *Regular and Special Education Relationship; Student Needs; Student Participation; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS	*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how educators can connect the individualized education programs (IEPs) of students with disabilities to the general education curriculum. It begins by reviewing new provisions in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that require a student's IEP to include a statement relative to how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum, and the supports that will be provided for the child to be involved and progress in the general curriculum. The paper then specifies IEP content areas that should be directly connected to the general curriculum, including: current performance, annual goals and objectives, supplementary aids and services, participation with typical peers, participation in state and district-wide tests, transition service needs, and reporting progress. The next section outlines questions to ask when developing an IEP. The questions are intended to provide a decision making process that will assist IEP teams in addressing the connection between the IEP and the general curriculum. These questions address desired outcomes for the student, essential skills and knowledge needed to meet the desired outcome, expectations of the general curriculum, present levels of performance, reasonable goals for the year, participation in assessments, and needs for specialized instruction and supports. (CR)

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ED 469 280

Connecting the IEP to the General Curriculum

A Talking Paper

By

Carol B. Massanari—Program Specialist
Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center
Utah State University
Center for Persons with Disabilities

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General Outline:

- Introduction and Rationale
- General Curriculum Defined
- Components Where Connections Can Be Made
- Decision Making Flow

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Introduction & Rationale

While a generally accepted goal of special education has been to return students to the general classroom, in reality many students have remained in special education for the remainder of their time in school. Goals and objectives for students have most often been based on some standardized achievement test used in the process of evaluation (e.g., the Woodcock Johnson) and may or may not be correlated with the content being taught in the general education setting. In fact, there have existed two separate curriculums: one for special education classrooms and one for the general education classroom. The net result has been that students with disabilities have not had opportunities to learn the content of the general curriculum and in essence were excluded from efforts to improve education through accountability.

Recognizing that too many students with disabilities were automatically excluded from statewide accountability systems and possibly from opportunities to learn subjects that are required of other students in the general curriculum, Congress included language in the reauthorization of IDEA that makes it imperative to make connections between IEP goals and objectives and the general curriculum. The Senate and House Committee report explains the intent as follows:

> The committee wishes to emphasize that, once a child has been identified as being eligible for special education, the connection between special education and related services and the child's opportunity to experience and benefit from the general education curriculum should be strengthened. The majority of children identified as eligible for special education and related services are capable of participating in the general education curriculum to varying degrees with some adaptations and modifications. This provision is intended to ensure that children's special education and related services are in addition to, and are affected by, the general education curriculum, not separate from it. (S. Rep. No. 105-17, p. 20 (1997))

In the regulations governing IDEA we find that the IEP must contain a statement relative to "how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum" [§300.347(a)(1)(i)]. In addition, the regulations stipulate that the IEP must also include a statement describing the services, supplementary aids, modifications, or supports that will be provided for the child "to be involved and progress in the general curriculum . . ." [§300.347(a)(3)(i)].

While it makes sense to presume that IEPs should be driven by the general curriculum, it has not always been part of practice. With the passage of IDEA '97 and the subsequent regulations, connecting the IEP to the general curriculum is now expected. It will mean that special education teachers will be expected to know the content and expectations of the general curriculum and how to develop IEPs founded on those expectations. For some teachers, this may be common practice. But for many, it will require gaining knowledge about the general curriculum as well as re-thinking and re-envisioning how IEP goals and objectives get selected. This paper is written to stimulate and add to the discussion on what it means to connect IEPs to the general curriculum. Recognizing that many states have already begun to address this issue, it is hoped that this paper might reinforce that work or stimulate some new idea. Where states have not been able to develop their own guidance tools, it is hoped this paper might provide a starting point for that work.

General Curriculum Defined

The regulations do not define curriculum but do specify that general curriculum is meant to be "the same curriculum as for nondisabled children" [§300.347(a)(1)(i)]. Webster's New World College Dictionary (1988) defines curriculum as the courses or set of offerings provided

by a school or college. Ron Brandt (1993, "Overview/The Curriculum Connection" *Educational Leadership*, vol. 50, no. 8) states that curriculum contains two parts: 1) what students are expected to learn and 2) how they are expected to learn it. In other words, it is the content that students are expected to learn and the way students are expected to learn or demonstrate they have learned the content. Curriculum does not include instructional strategy; for example, it does not stipulate if a teacher is to use direct instruction versus experiential learning. But it does include expectations of how children will learn something, e.g., multiplication computed using paper and pencil as opposed to using a calculator. For the purpose of developing an IEP that is connected to the general curriculum, it is critical that consideration is given to both the content nondisabled students are expected learn as well as the process by which they are to learn it. This ensures that the team is looking at both what the student should learn as well as considering accommodations or modifications that may be needed for the process by which they learn or demonstrate learning that content.

Components Where Connections Can Be Made

In actuality, the entire IEP conversation should evolve around connections to the general curriculum. However, there are seven specific IEP content areas where the conversation should be directly connected to the general curriculum in order to identify the implications for the student's educational program. These seven areas include: current performance, annual goals and objectives, supplementary aids and services, participation with nondisabled children, participation in state and district-wide tests, transition service needs, and reporting progress.

> **Current performance** – Each IEP is to include a description of the present level of performance for the student. Some of this information, naturally, comes from the multi-disciplinary evaluation results, other test data, and classroom observations. But a critical requirement from IDEA '97 is to include a statement as to how the child's disability

affects her/his involvement in the general curriculum. Using the above definition of general curriculum, one would expect the discussion at this point to include a clarification of the expectations of the general classroom, both what the student's peers are expected to learn and how they are expected to learn it. When that is known, it becomes necessary to identify the strengths and challenges for the student in relation to those expectations. This would be recorded as part of the present levels of performance and becomes a major factor in determining the goals and objectives for the student. This part of the IEP should also include a discussion of expectations related to extracurricular participation. While extracurricular activities are not generally considered part of the formal curriculum (i.e., a course of study), they are very much an integral part of the school experience, contribute to a student's learning and development, and as such are part of the total school curriculum.

Annual goals and objectives – Goals and short-term objectives must be individualized for the student, and yet they should be linked to the general curriculum. This means that the goals and objectives might be focused around helping a student acquire the background content knowledge and skills essential for eventually being able to achieve to the level of his or her peers. It might mean focusing goals and objectives around helping a student acquire essential learning strategies that will help him or her better meet the expectations around how students are to learn the content. It might mean identifying adaptations, accommodations, or modifications to the general curriculum. Or it might mean identifying how a student's needs are linked to the general curriculum even though the specific benchmark or skill is different from that of peers (e.g., learning to use a switch device is linked to communication or reading).

Supplementary aids and services – IEPs must include a description of the supplementary aids and services that a student will need. Supplementary aids and services include modifications or program supports needed for the student to receive a free appropriate public education. This includes modifications or program supports needed for participation in the general classroom, and can include supports directly for the student or for the teacher (e.g., special training). It is critical for the IEP team to be knowledgeable about the general curriculum in order to know what supplementary aids and services might allow the student to participate in the general curriculum. In some cases, a student might be able to remain in the general classroom with the provision of supplementary aids and services only.

Participation with children who are not disabled – IEPs must include some explanation of the extent to which a child will not participate in the general classroom or other extracurricular activities. If the discussion to this point has focused primarily on connections to the more formal curriculum (i.e., the course of study, standards, benchmarks, classroom lessons, etc.), this is the point where conversation around participation in extracurricular activities can not be disregarded.

Participation in state and district-wide tests – Both IDEA and Title I require states and districts to include all students when conducting state or district-wide assessments, generally for the purposes of accountability reporting. The IEP team must determine the

level at which the student will participate in the state and district-wide tests. State and district-wide tests are developed to measure student progress in the general curriculum. How the student is participating in the general curriculum, i.e., the goals and objectives that drive the content and process of the student's learning, will determine how the student will participate in state and district-wide tests. There are three ways in which a student might participate. They are as follows:

- take the state or district-wide test with peers at the same time and in the same format as peers;
- take the state or district-wide test with accommodations or modifications; or
- participate in an alternate assessment.

Transition service needs – Beginning at age 14, and earlier if appropriate, the IEP must include a discussion of the course of study a student will need in order to achieve his or her desired post-school outcome. This is another natural place for making a connection to the general curriculum in that the course of study is most often the classes that are part of the general curriculum, classes or credits needed in order to graduate, or classes that are essential if a student is going to pass an exit exam required for getting a diploma.

Reporting progress – Another new requirement found in IDEA '97 is that the IEP must state how the parents will be informed of student progress and how often they will be informed, which is to be no less than as often as progress is reported for nondisabled students. Wherever possible, it makes sense that such reports would be part of or integrated into the general reporting procedures of a school, i.e., part of regular report cards. To make the determination of how and how often progress should be reported, it is important that the IEP team have information about the general classroom teacher's practice related to reporting progress in order to connect the IEP decisions around reporting progress to the general classroom practice as much as possible.

Knowing which parts of the IEP have a relationship to the general curriculum is the first step in knowing where to make the connections. But knowing the parts and actually making the connections may be two different things. In order to better see the relationship and how connections might be made, the next section outlines questions that the IEP team can use when developing an IEP. These questions provide a decision making process that will assist IEP teams to better address the connection between the IEP and general curriculum.

Decision Making Flow

When making IEP decisions, it is critical to have the right people at the table, i.e., people who have knowledge about the student, people who have knowledge about the general curriculum, and people who will be implementing the IEP. IDEA '97 includes the following as the list of required IEP team members:

- Parents;
- A regular education teacher of the child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment);
- A special education teacher of the child (at least one);
- A public agency representative who
  - ✓ is qualified to supervise the provision of specially designed instruction,
  - ✓ is knowledgeable about the general curriculum, and
  - ✓ is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency;
- An individual who can interpret instructional implications of the evaluation results;
- Other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise; and
- The student, if appropriate.

Parent participation is very important in that parents bring invaluable information about the student that might not be identified readily in a school setting. It is also an opportunity for the parent to learn more about the expectations of the general curriculum. The regular classroom teacher brings knowledge about the general curriculum, both content and expectations for how students learn/demonstrate content knowledge. Additionally, it is an opportunity for the regular classroom teacher to learn more about the student and to participate in helping to identify the supplementary services or supports that could allow more successful participation for the student. Hopefully, the special education teacher has begun to learn about the general curriculum before the IEP team meeting. However, the meeting provides an opportunity for ensuring that the knowledge and assumptions held by the special education teacher are accurate.

Once the IEP team is assembled, the discussion can get underway. But where do you start and what is the best way to proceed? When working with a group who are to arrive at shared

decisions, it is helpful to have a list of guiding questions so the group can process the information more easily as a group. Individually as human beings, we often skip through steps simply because the mind works silently. In a group, however, it is critical to articulate those steps to ensure that each person in the group has an opportunity to consider each step. When things do not get articulated, it often leads to individuals holding different assumptions and therefore having different expectations for what is to happen or different pictures of what took place. A flow chart (see Chart 1) and subsequent questions have been developed to assist IEP teams with this decision making process in a way that ensures that the general curriculum is an integral part of the discussion. Please note, these questions do not identify all the information that is to be part of an IEP. Rather, they serve only as a decision making guide to ensure connections to the IEP are made.

What is the desired outcome for this student? When a student turns 14, the transition planning process kicks in. At that point it is essential to know what the student expects to do after leaving high school because planning a course of study is dependent on the student's goals for her or his life. But this question is not only relevant to transition planning. It is one that should be asked at any age, but prior to 14 the question may be more directed to the parent. In other words, this is a time to discuss what the parents see as their broader goal, vision, or dream for the student. For the purposes of IEP planning, it is good to keep the focus within a 2 to 3 year range by asking questions like:

- What are you hoping this student will be doing two or three years from now?
- What do you see this student doing two or three years from now?
- What do you see yourself doing when you leave high school?

Naturally, it is important to help keep a realistic perspective while at the same time supporting high expectations.

What is the desired outcome for this student?

- ✓ Three to four years from now
- ✓ Student's desired post-school outcome

What are the skills and knowledge essential to meeting the desired outcome?

What are the expectations of the general curriculum relative to the student's age/grade?

- ✓ Content
- ✓ Expectations for learning and demonstration of learning
- ✓ Extracurricular activities or events available

How do skills and knowledge essential to meeting the desired outcome compare with the general curriculum, including content and expectations for learning?

- ✓ Where are the similarities/connections?
- ✓ Where are the differences?
- ✓ Where within the general curriculum, including extracurricular, are the opportunities for learning the needed skills and knowledge?

What are the student's present levels of performance?

- ✓ What skills and knowledge does the student already possess?
- ✓ What other strengths does the student present?
- ✓ What are the areas of challenge?
- ✓ What accommodations, modifications, or other supports have proven beneficial for this student?

Given all the information we have discussed thus far, what do we think are reasonable goals for this year?

- ✓ What are the objectives for each goal?
- ✓ What instructional accommodations are needed?
- ✓ What modifications to the general curriculum are needed?
- ✓ How will progress be reported and how often?

Given the information we have discussed thus far, how will the student participate in state and district-wide assessments?

- ✓ With peers as given
- ✓ With peers and with accommodations or modifications
- ✓ Alternate assessment

Given the goals and objectives plus the information we discussed, what specialized instruction and supports or services are needed?

- ✓ Regular classroom with supports
- ✓ Special education
- ✓ Related services
- ✓ Other supports or services

Chart 1: IEPs – Ensuring General Curriculum

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What are the skills and knowledge essential to meeting the desired outcome? When the outcome has been stated, the next step is to identify the skills and knowledge that are essential to meeting the desired outcome. This step is critical for determining what the student will need to learn if he or she is to achieve the desired outcome.

What are the expectations of the general curriculum relative to the student's age/grade? At this step, the IEP team is still gathering information and not making comparisons or interpretations. If connections to the general curriculum are to be made, the team must be informed about the general curriculum. This step ensures that information about the general curriculum is brought to the table and becomes part of the conversation. At this step, the team will want to review the content as well as the expectations for how the student will learn or demonstrate knowledge and skill in the content. For students with mild/moderate disabilities the team will want to look at standards, benchmarks, and teaching units for the grade to which the student is assigned. For students with more severe cognitive disabilities, the team may want to look at connecting to the standard (the larger goal statement within state/district standards) for the age level of the student. Or, many states have now developed some type of expanded standards that are connected to the general standards but used for the alternate assessment that can help IEP teams make the connections to the general curriculum. However, it is still important to know the expectations of the general classroom for the corresponding age of the student so connections can be made in relation to how the student might be included in the general classroom setting for all or part of his/her learning.

With the emphasis on standards today, it is tempting to think that the standards are the curriculum. It is important to remember that standards are the driver, the basis for designing the

instructional curriculum. This means that IEP teams will need to consider both the standards as well as the school-based instructional curriculum, which should be aligned to the standards. Further, goals and objectives for the student will not be a re-statement of a standard or benchmark, but rather will be statements that reflect the necessary learning that will lead to a standard.

Another aspect of the general curriculum is found in the extracurricular activities and events. Extracurricular activities and events are often great places for learning skills that are not academic. It is quite probable that for many students with disabilities, some of the skills and knowledge needed to achieve the desired outcome will not be academic, but may be more social or physical in nature. For this reason, the team will want information about the extracurricular activities and events that might be effective learning sources for consideration.

How do skills and knowledge essential to meeting the desired outcome compare with the general curriculum, including content and expectations for learning? At this point the IEP team begins the process of reflection and interpretation. Comparing the skills and knowledge essential to meeting the desired outcome with the general curriculum helps the team determine where the needed skills and knowledge are embedded within the general curriculum.

What are the student's present levels of performance? At this point, the team takes a comprehensive look at what the student can already do and what challenges the student faces in meeting the desired outcome. The team looks at the evaluation information, classroom information, observational data, parent information, and even student self-assessment to identify the knowledge and skills, i.e., the strengths the student possesses. The team also identifies areas of challenge, that is, the skills and knowledge that will need to be learned and the student qualities/behaviors that present potential hurdles for meeting the outcome. A final component of

the present levels of performance is to identify those accommodations, modifications, or supports that have proven useful to the student in prior situations. The team should not just look at things that have worked in the classroom or in school, but should also engage the parent in identifying things they may have tried at home that have proven successful.

Given all the information we have discussed thus far, what do we think are reasonable goals and objectives for this year? The IEP team now is ready to begin making some decisions. The first decision is around the goals and objectives that are appropriate for this student for the upcoming year. The goals and objectives should be directly related to the attainment of skills and knowledge that will move the student toward achieving the desired outcome while guided by the expectations found within the general curriculum. With the goals and objectives, the team needs to make decisions about any instructional accommodations that will facilitate the student's learning, modifications to the general curriculum that may be necessary, how will progress be reported, and how often to the parents.

Given the information we have discussed thus far, how will the student participate in state and district-wide assessments? Another important decision that can be made at this point has to do with student participation in state and district-wide assessment. Since the conversation has been grounded in the general curriculum including a description of the expectations of the general curriculum, a comparison of the present levels of performance in relation to the general curriculum, and goals and objectives connected to the general curriculum, it should be fairly logical for the team to now decide how the student will participate in the state or district-wide assessments.

Given the goals and objectives plus the information we discussed, what specialized instruction and supports or services are needed? Finally, the team must make some decisions

about the structure that will best support the student's learning. The team will need to decide if achieving the goals and objectives can be accomplished by staying in the regular classroom or by receiving specialized instruction in a special education setting. If a special education setting is determined to be the least restrictive environment, the team will need to decide the amount of time, location, and duration of this service. Additionally, the team will need to decide if the student needs to receive any related services and again determine the amount of time, location, and duration of the service. Finally, the team needs to decide if there are additional supports or services that will benefit the student's learning, including the possibility of training for any teachers working with the student.

As noted earlier, these questions do not assure that all of the information in the IEP will be completed. Rather, they only assist in making the connection to the general curriculum and identifying information for those components of the IEP where such connections are made.

Closing

Students with disabilities receiving an education in a special education classroom have many times been provided instruction from a curriculum that was separate from those of their peers in general classrooms. Now, with the passage of IDEA 1997 there is a requirement that students have access to the general curriculum. This access is made possible through the IEP process where educational goals and objectives are connected to the general curriculum. This is true regardless of disability. The specificity of the connection that is made will be dependent on the student's strengths and needs, but each student's IEP should reflect how the goals and objectives connect to the general curriculum. In the end, every child's education, regardless of disability, is viewed as part of one system and stemming from one shared curriculum.

Utah State UNIVERSITY

This document was developed by the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, a affiliate of the Center for Persons with Disabilities, a University Affiliated Program a Utah State University.

The Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center operates under Grant No. H326R98000 with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education. Partial support is also provide by Utah State University. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OSEP or US and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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